

Fishhook redesign still needs revision

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CAPITOLA — The latest Fishhook design comes with a heavy price: a bottleneck that could create new traffic hazards and slow traffic for miles.

The news came Thursday at a meeting of the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission. Commissioners had waited since June to hear details of the new plan.

The commission took no action and will wait until after an evening public hearing scheduled for Oct. 20. Residents will then be able to have their say on the controversial project.

For months, state engineers have scrambled to rework their design to improve safety at the notorious interchange. A design already had been chosen but had met with strong community opposition.

Caltrans had initially slated a 40-foot, tri-level elevated structure to replace the existing Fishhook. That was to come with sound walls — one as tall as 40 feet — in adjacent neighborhoods.

In response, engineers modified major features of the plan. But that too has its

problems.

The latest revision changes the way southbound Highway 17 and southbound Highway 1 would merge. The interchange would have four lanes — two for traffic coming from Highway 17, two for traffic coming from Highway 1. The road would be narrowed back to two lanes at Morrissey Avenue.

But southbound Highway 17 drivers would now find themselves merging into the fast lanes of Highway 1, posing problems for those wanting to get off on those first Highway 1 exits. Under the old plan, they would have skirted around the outside of Highway 1 and merged into the slow lanes.

Moving the interchange from the outside to the inside of Highway 1 also will mean relocating southbound Highway 1 from Plymouth Street to the Carbonera Creek Bridge, and widening the Branciforte Avenue overcrossing.

Based on Caltrans projections, traffic at the interchange will increase 35 percent by the year 2020. That would mean squeezing about 5,000 cars per hour in each direction through the junction during peak

travel times.

That could bring traffic to a standstill for more than a mile each way, said Caltrans project manager Steve DiGrazia.

The solution would mean having to lengthen the extra lane of the interchange to smooth the merge and give drivers a chance to move over to the right, said Ken Nelson of Caltrans. Whether this will work under the drafted plan is still under study, he said.

"I am very concerned about the constructability of this," he added. "You can't take all this width and shove it all together."

Engineers will have to review the environmental impact of the latest plan. The revision also would:

- lower the height of the connector by up to 15 feet, bringing it down to 23 feet,
- move the highway and proposed retaining walls away from the Ocean Terrace Condominiums and homes on Fernside Street,
- reduce the height of retaining walls near the Ocean Terrace Condominiums and near Fernside Street,
- and eliminate the need for a retaining

wall from Emeline Avenue to Carbonera Creek.

Various other features that had been planned for the second stage of the project must be done sooner. That likely will change the cost of the \$30.8 million project. A new price estimate won't be available until December.

Despite the new challenges, transportation commission Executive Director Linda Wilshusen said she was still optimistic about the project and the way Caltrans has responded to concerns.

"The revision has a lot of potential," she said.

The original design drew heated opposition as soon as residents understood how it would affect their neighborhood: noise, sound walls and the removal of trees. Others objected to the project saying the concrete structure did not fit with the image of Santa Cruz County nor did anything to alleviate congestion.

The Santa Cruz City Council voted to recommend that the project be nixed.

Transportation Commissioner Katherine Beiers, who also serves on the Santa Cruz City Council, said she was eager to

hear more about the design.

"I'm still cautious," she said after the meeting. "I have my reservations. ... It's all in the details."

The latest tweaking of the plan has delayed the project by six months, DiGrazia said. Construction was to begin in 2000 and take three years to complete.

Plans to make the Fishhook safer began in 1985, when the local transportation commission asked Caltrans to study the notorious junction. The interchange was found to have an accident rate five times that of the state average.

A public hearing on the Highway 1/17 Interchange Improvement Project will be held 7:30 p.m. Monday, Oct. 20 at the Seacliff Inn, 7500 Old Dominion Court, in Aptos.

Caltrans will explain the design and address questions and comments. The hearing will be focused on the key elements of the design, including structures, ramps and retaining walls. Specifics about sound walls and landscaping will not be discussed and will be the subject of future neighborhood meetings.